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## Cities of the Prairie Revisited: The Closing of the Metropolitan Frontier

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*Cities of the Prairie Revisited: The Closing of the Metropolitan Frontier.* By Daniel J. Elazar et al. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. Maps, figures, tables, notes, bibliography, index. 288 pp. \$25.00.

In a series of highly-regarded publications during the early 1970s, Daniel Elazar selected ten medium-sized communities he believed were representative of urban America, placed them in a broad historical context, and examined their ability to respond politically to the changes and problems confronting them in the years between World War II and the Kennedy administration. Elazar now returns to those same communities (predominantly in Illinois) and picks up the story where he left off, carrying it down through the Great Society, Vietnam, and Nixon's New Federalism.

Expanding on a theme developed in the earlier study, Elazar describes the mounting pressure exerted on the cities by the external forces of state and federal government and by

national policy issues such as civil rights, all of which the communities variously perceived as both threatening in sociopolitical terms and promising from the standpoint of revenue. How the cities reacted depended in large measure on their distinct political cultures and geohistorical positions. Generalizations are nonetheless possible. Only the racial issue, for example, disturbed the basic division between locals and cosmopolitans that continued to inform community politics. Moreover, despite a broad national shift in the 1960s toward assertive, confrontational politics, these communities retained their traditional political style. Finally, the cities of the prairie hewed to the Tocquevillian federalist model of government, resisting the temptation to accept the new ideology of centralizing managerialism that would have undermined the power and role of established local interests.

Elazar, and the several co-authors whose case studies comprise nearly half the book, want to stress community individuality, but this theme is both the book's strength and weakness. We can be grateful that the study was not flawed by heavy-handed attempts to force the cities into inappropriate models. Still, readers will easily get bogged down by the detailed discussion of so many different communities and increasingly frustrated by the lack of a clear interpretive thrust, such as what seems to have been a distinction between proactive and reactive community approaches. In the end, the most provocative point may well be the lesson Elazar draws from his research. Urbanites must not be "consumers," he writes, distracted by commitments to outside economic or government interests, but instead must somehow recapture the spirit of an older urban frontier era when the absence of externally provided alternatives made a wholesome citizenship and civic pride endemic to community life.

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